

The Social Media Dance

How the dance world is developing digitally

As a hugely vibrant and diverse medium, dance lends itself easily to the world of technology and social media. Perhaps most importantly, it's something that everyone can take part in, watch and appreciate whatever their age, location or background.

Emilia Spitz and Linda Uruchurtu, joint founders of website The Ballet Bag and creative studio Lume Labs, have been named among the '100 Best Arts Tweeters' by *The Times*. They told us, "Dance is an amazing medium, not only because of the rich pool of content out there, but also for its potential for true audience engagement. Most of the work we've been doing in arts consultancy has been targeted at dance organisations and dance individuals to help them connect with audiences through social media, and we're always amazed at the synergies between dance and creative technology."

There are many examples of how dance companies and individual dancers and choreographers have embraced online outlets such as Twitter, blogging and YouTube, from Sergei Polunin's tweets last year about his sudden exit from The Royal Ballet, to Diablo Ballet's mission to create a Ballet via social media with *The Web Ballet* (more recently christened *Flight of the Dodo*). Diablo Ballet has also adopted the growing enthusiasm among US performance venues for 'tweet seats' by introducing live tweet nights at performances.

The Providence Performing Arts Center says the goal of its tweet seats is to "engage theatergoers on social media, and build extra excitement for shows," while the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis aims to encourage deeper interaction with their performances. A flurry of social media activity can also help with ticket sales, as Andrew Goldberg from the Adrienne Arsht Center says, "If you get a Tweet from a friend, 'You've got to check this out!' you're more likely to go check it out than if we tell you."¹

The trend may be catching on in the UK with Norwich venue, The Garage, announcing in February this year that it has designated a section in its gallery for tweeters. However, just 10% of participants in an online poll by *The Guardian* in March 2012 indicated an acceptance of live tweeting at the theatre.² With the urge to instantly share experiences with the wider world just too urgent for some to wait until the interval, perhaps tweet seats are inevitable and do, at least, help to minimize disturbance to other theater-goers by herding the tweeters together. Although it doesn't intend to introduce an area for live tweeting, Boston's Huffington Theater is planning to introduce a 'Twittermission' where the performers and production team conduct a Q&A during the interval and the responses are projected onto screens in the lobby.

As a visual medium, dance is particularly suited to YouTube and other video sharing sites, as well as Pinterest where a quick search for 'dance' brings up an amazing array of images.

More than 250m photos are uploaded to Facebook every day and over 829,000 videos are uploaded daily to YouTube.³ As a specialist dance channel, DSI-London.TV allows online viewers to see exclusive videos of Ballroom and Latin events with interviews and profiles of leading lights in the world of Dancesport. In March last year, the Royal Opera House in London first streamed *Royal Ballet Live*, offering a live fly-on-the-wall view of a full working day with their dancers. It was shown on their YouTube channel and *The Guardian* website and garnered 200,000 views.

A behind-the-scenes aspect can be a key element of a company's social media profile, allowing them to increase the range of information they push out online. Rather than a straight sales offering when tickets for a show go on sale, anticipation builds through interviews with principals in rehearsal, the latest photos of costumes, and the public are able to gain previously unheard of access to the key players. Citing backstage tweets by New York City Ballet's Ashley Bouder in the *New York Times*, Gia Kourlas argues that Twitter is "starting to change the public face of ballet (...) making ballet dancers human."⁴

Tapping effectively into social media can also bring dancers to a massive potential audience, many of whom they would not be able to reach through traditional methods. San Francisco Ballet's principal dancer, Maria Kochetkova has more than 187,000 followers on Twitter and the company estimates that 11% of their website traffic comes via the 300,000 people who follow them on social platforms.

Marrying dance and technology even further are DanceDigital, a UK-based company that seeks to "catalyse the development of new choreographies in digital environments" and offers support to artists and technologists to create and develop new performance work, and Movement Media, a New York-based agency that helps dance artists integrate digital technology and create works for the screen.

Although resources need to be effectively allocated to the use and expansion of social media, outlets like Twitter and Facebook are free and there are many sharing and tracking tools that can help you make the most out of your online activities. However, a recent survey from the Pew Internet and American Life Project recognised the all-important need for arts organisations to allocate resources to digital strategies, stating that, "Organizations will continue to need to adapt and incorporate digital technologies into their programming."⁵

This underlines the increasing tendency for dance companies to do much more with social media than just post news about ticket offers or add a video preview to YouTube. A growing desire to creatively merge digital with dance has already revealed huge possibilities and, with so many companies jumping on board, it will be interesting to see what the future holds.

Sarah Clarke, Head of Marketing & Membership Support Services, ISTD

1. "Tweet Seats" in *Theaters Spark Battle Between Technology and Tradition* by Christine Dimattei, *WLRN.org*, 1st March 2013.

2. *'Would you welcome 'tweet seats' in theatres?'* *The Guardian*, 6th March 2012.
 3. *48 Significant Social Media Facts, Figures and Statistics*, www.jeffbullas.com
 4. *'Ballet Stars Now Tweet as Well as Flutter'* by Gia Kourlas, *New York Times*, 29th March 2010.
 5. *'5 Things the Dance Field Should Be Talking About'* by Marc Kirschner, *Huffington Post*, 10th January 2013.
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Twitter Tip

'MT' at the start of a tweet does not mean that someone has tried to type 'RT' too quickly! It means 'modified tweet' and can be used if you want to tweak something in the tweet – perhaps you want to add another hashtag or use a link that you've created to track click-throughs. It can be a good way to share a tweet that lets you add a little something of your own while still acknowledging the original authorship.